News Release

US Army Corps of Engineers

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Agencies announce release of Missouri River Biological Opinion

Two Federal agencies are working together to conserve the Missouri River endangered species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have completed an Endangered Species Act consultation regarding operation of the Missouri River dams and reservoirs, the bank stabilization and navigation project, and related operations of the Kansas River tributary reservoirs.

Through the consultation process, actions were developed that the Service believes will provide protection for the endangered pallid sturgeon and least tern and the threatened piping plover while allowing continued operation of projects on the river.

“This is an extremely complex issue and the biological opinion is a result of intensive discussions between the Service and the Corps,” said Ralph Morgenweck, the Service’s Director for the Mountain-Prairie region. “But, I believe we have developed a plan that will benefit the entire Missouri River ecosystem.”

"There is significant agreement between the Corps and Service on the known biological attributes necessary to recover the listed species," said Brig. Gen. Carl Strock, Northwestern Division Engineer. "The Corps is absolutely committed to its role in recovery of the listed species but we also have an obligation to support other project purposes," added General Strock.

"Our initial assessment is that elements of the biological opinion slightly increase the risk of flooding and have significant impacts to navigation. As we develop our implementation plan we will evaluate the impact of the reasonable and prudent alternative on these and other project purposes. The Corps will consider other alternatives that meet the biological objectives with reduced impacts in other areas," he said.

“The Missouri River is an incredibly important resource, serving many needs for many people,” said William Hartwig, Regional Director for the Service’s Great Lakes-Big Rivers Region. “We must recognize as well the needs of the natural resources of the river, particularly imperiled species, and do our best in managing the Missouri to ensure their survival.”

The Service prepared a biological opinion concluding that continuation of current operations on the Missouri River is likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the listed species.

The necessary conservation actions to avoid jeopardy to the listed species are contained in the "reasonable and prudent alternative (RPA)" and are designed to return the Missouri to a more natural river system. It is the combination of all parts of the alternative, working in concert, that will eliminate jeopardy to the species. The RPA determined by the Service includes five parts:

1. Flow Enhancement: Implementation of a spring rise on average every third year and an annual summer drawdown from Gavins Point Dam is necessary to restore spawning cues for fish; maintain and develop sandbar habitat and the associated shallow, slow water habitat needed by birds and fish; and enhance aquatic habitat through connection of the main channel to backwaters and side channels. A spring release from Fort Peck Dam will provide spawning cues and increase the amount of warm water habitat available to pallid sturgeon and native river fish.

2. Habitat Restoration/Creation/Acquisition: A portion of the historic habitat will be restored, enhanced, and conserved in riverine sections that will benefit the listed birds and fish. Habitat restoration goals are 20-30 acres of shallow water (less than 5 feet deep, less than 2.5 ft/sec. velocity) per mile. Similarly, variable goals by river segments for emergent interchannel sandbar are also identified.

3. Unbalanced System Regulation: Unbalancing of the upper three reservoirs, when runoff conditions permit, by holding one reservoir low, one at average levels, and one rising on a 3-year rotation will increase the availability of tern and plover habitat in reservoirs in drawdown years; maintain tern and plover sandbar habitat in riverine segments below Fort Peck or Garrison Dams in years of higher releases due to reservoir drawdown; and increase availability of tern and plover sandbar habitat in riverine segments below Fort Peck and Garrison Dams in years of steady or rising reservoir levels.

4. Adaptive Management/Monitoring: Implementation of an adaptive management process that allows efficient modification/implementation of management actions in response to new information and to changing environmental conditions to benefit the species. The two components of this process will be the establishment of an interagency coordination team that will coordinate and guide development and implementation of a robust monitoring program to better understand baseline conditions, analyze actions, and identify modification to improve results.

5. Propagation/Augmentation: The Corps and the Service will work together to increase pallid sturgeon propagation and augmentation efforts, while habitat and hydrology improvements are being implemented. This short-term action will ensure genetic integrity and prevent extinction of existing pallid sturgeon populations.

Details of the primary actions of the Reasonable and Prudent Alternative described above and the complementary actions are described in the biological opinion text.

"Work on several parts of the RPA are already underway, including studies for a possible test of modified flows out of Fort Peck Dam as early as next spring," said General Strock. "Over the next few months we will consult with impacted tribal governments, states, and other regional stakeholders to craft the details of our implementation plan. Ultimately though, our ability to meet the recovery goals will depend on congressional and regional support of expanded authorities and increased appropriations, especially for the extensive monitoring necessary to measure the success of the RPA."

The biological opinion is available on the worldwide web at: http://www.nwd.usace.army.mil/ or by writing to: Project Manager, Missouri River Master Manual, 12565 West Center Road, Omaha, NE 68144.

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